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**Hardships and
Near-Death Experiences
at the Hands of the
Nazi SS and Gestapo
(1942-1945)**

***What it took for one Jewish
man to survive the Holocaust***

The Story of Victor Lewis

Victor Lewis (Leserkiewicz) was born in Krakow, Poland, in 1919 to a religious Jewish family. At the beginning of World War II, he had two parents, Abraham and Berta; two sisters, Lola and Greta; and two brothers, Leon (Leszek) and Jacob (Kubus). Lola left Krakow for Palestine years before the war broke out and was fortunate to have avoided the Nazi atrocities in Europe.

After a harrowing 6 years at the hands of the Nazis, both of Mr. Lewis' parents, and his sister, Greta, had perished. Both of his brothers barely managed to survive, but his youngest brother, Jacob, died from food poisoning just a few days after being liberated from a concentration camp in Austria.

From the transport out of the Krakow ghetto that should have killed him, to the gruesome concentration camp at Plaszow, and finally, after five years of hardship - to the relative "safe haven" at Oscar Schindler's ammunition factory in Brinnlitz, Czechoslovakia, this is a heroic account of intense hardships and harrowing near-death experiences that were required for Victor Lewis to survive the Holocaust.

I'm not a poet or a writer. But I have an important story to tell. My memories of the Nazi occupation of Poland and my experiences during the Holocaust gave me nightmares and interrupted my ability to sleep for many years after the war.

I wrote this account in memory of my dearest parents and siblings, most of whom perished in the Holocaust. I also wrote this account for all to read, so that the experiences of my family during the Holocaust will never be forgotten.

Now, it will be the job of our children, our grandchildren, our teachers, and historians to know the horrible story of the Holocaust, to pass it on to future generations - in the hope that it will never happen again!

Victor Lewis
December 11, 2000

Deportation from the Krakow Ghetto

A year and a half after the invasion of Poland by the Germans, the Nazis evacuated the Jews from my home town, Krakow, and resettled us in very cramped quarters in the most dilapidated part of the city. On March 13, 1941, my family of six people was forced to relocate from our comfortable 3-bedroom home at Retjana #5 to a cramped one bedroom apartment at Targowa #1, which we shared with several other families. Life was difficult in the ghetto. Jews were routinely abused, assaulted, and even murdered by the Nazis, who patrolled the streets with pistols, rifles, and whips.

We were prisoners at the hands of an abusive force that had prompted a world war, but we were totally unprepared for the obscene horrors and large-scale genocide that our captors were about to execute on us.

~~Soon, we were ordered to leave the ghetto. I wanted to stay with my family, but my parents insisted that I leave with them. I was scared, but I knew I had to follow them. We were all very afraid of what would happen to us.~~
The date was October 28, 1942. The Nazis were about to implement their second deportation of Jews from the Krakow ghetto to the extermination camps. We were told that the ghetto would be liquidated, that we all were to be transported to labor camps, and that everybody had to go to Plac Zgody square with their most important belongings. Fear could be seen on the faces of every Jew in the ghetto. Everyone felt that something horrible was about to happen.

On my way to our family's apartment, I met my parents, my sister Greta, and my brother Leszek inside the corridor of their building. My parents had come out of the bunker where they were hiding, and I wanted to warn them to stay inside. They didn't have any working papers (Arbeits-bescheinigungen), so I thought that their lives could be in danger. But, it was too late to tell them to go back into hiding. From all sides, the SS Gestapo appeared before us and pushed us into the street.



Transport of Nazi military to Poland sadistically announces, "We are going to Poland to Eliminate the Jews." Mr. Lewis experienced firsthand The Nazi fervor in trying to accomplish their mission of genocide. (Photo from the museum store at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp)

Leszek and I had working papers indicating that he was a toolmaker and I was an auto mechanic for the German SS. We thought that these papers would save us and our family from the deportation. We presented the papers to SS Obersturmführer Martin Fellenz,¹ a Gestapo officer who was in charge of the deportation. Fellenz ripped up our papers, began to beat us with his club, and ordered us to go with all of the other prisoners to Plac Zgody.

At Plac Zgody, I noticed many familiar faces, including my girlfriend Regina's mother, Ida, and her two sisters, Tosia and Gienia. I wanted to talk to them but I was not permitted to do so. I had to sit on the ground and remain still. The Germans ordered us not to move an inch. To prove their point, they began to kill anyone who got up or moved around. At that point I decided that I had to escape, no matter what might be the consequences. I told Leszek my plans, and

¹ Mr. Lewis was a witness at the 1965 criminal trial of Martin Fellenz in Kiel, Germany. See page 39 for an account of the trial, published in the German newspaper "Kieler Schwurgericht."



Entrance to the Krakow Ghetto

he said he would try to escape, too. I told my parents and sister what I intended to do, and they told me to go ahead and run.

Soon, we were ordered to line up, four in a row. I told my family not to look for me if I tried to escape. Passing Wieliczka Street, I tried to run into a house, but I was unsuccessful. I was stopped by an SS guard and forced back onto the line. I was lucky that the guard did not kill me right then and there for trying to escape.



On Mr. Lewis' return to Krakow 43 years after the second liquidation of the ghetto, Plac Zgody was eerily quiet. On October 28, 1942, this square was the site of a roundup of thousands of Jews, random murder of innocent people, and the deportation of all of the people rounded up that day to the extermination camp at Belzec.

Forced onto a Train to the Death Camps

After marching in silence for an hour, we arrived at the Plaszow Railroad Station where cattle cars were ready to be loaded with Jewish prisoners. We stood in front of the train for a few hours. Then, all of a sudden, the doors from the cattle cars were pulled open.

Yelling at us to climb into the cars as quickly as possible, the SS began to beat Jewish men, women, and children with their rifle butts. Some of us were killed from the beatings and shootings during this torturous mayhem, but most managed to get into the cattle cars. When Leszek and I tried to help our parents into the cattle car, the Nazis demanded that we "hurry up" and began to hit us on our heads with their rifle butts. People were panicking as they were forced into the train. I knew that I had to escape from this situation, no matter what.

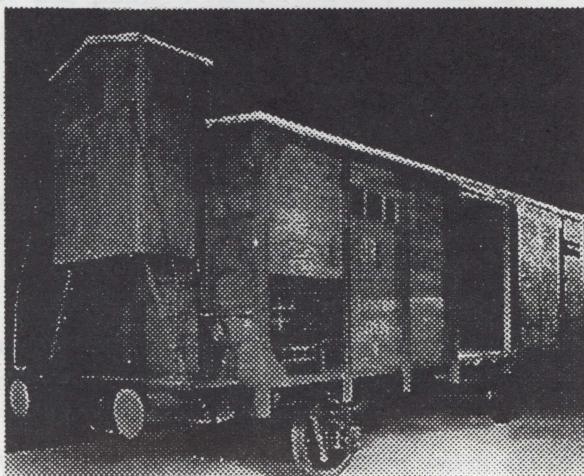
More than a hundred adults and small children were packed into our small cattle car. There was no water and very little air to breathe. People were screaming and there were many cries for help. Some of the older and weaker people began to die. Some people began to take off their clothes to get relief from the unbearable heat. My heart was breaking at this horrible scene. I felt that I couldn't bear the torture any longer.

It was clearly apparent to me that the transport was not headed to an "Arbeitslager" (labor camp), as the Nazi's had told us. It was headed to the gas chambers! Once more, I told my father that I had to escape.

Escape from the Death Train

I managed to occupy a spot on the train near a small window. The window was barricaded with two steel bars. When the train left the station, I pulled a hidden hacksaw blade that I kept in my boot and I started to cut through the bars. Fellow prisoners began to protest loudly, arguing that if anyone would be missing during a recount at our destination point, all remaining prisoners would be killed. I screamed back at them, "Do you really believe that we are going to a work camp? This whole transport is going to the gas chambers, so save your lives!" Most of the prisoners had hoped that they were going to a work camp, not to an extermination camp. It was difficult for them to believe that the Nazis were about to conduct genocide on the Jewish people.

By sunset, I completed sawing through the bars. When I asked my parents to jump with me, my father replied: "If you can save yourself, then, by all means, go ahead. But I am too old to run, and mother is too old, too." Then I asked my sister Greta to follow me. She replied, "I will stay with mom and dad. I will watch over them and take care of them." Only Leszek was willing to jump. We both knew that jumping might not be safe. The train was moving fairly fast, so we weren't sure how we would land after we jumped. Furthermore, the SS soldiers were posted with machine guns on top of each cattle car, ready to gun down anyone trying to escape.



Cattle car used by the Nazis to transport Jews to death camps.

Nevertheless, we thought that we would certainly be killed at the extermination camp in Belzec, so there really was no choice.

When I was ready to jump, my whole family had tears in their eyes. My father gave me money and his golden Shafhausen pocket watch and chain, and told me to sell the watch if I need the money. Leszek received mother's and sister's jewelry to exchange for cash. At this point, I became very anxious and began to wonder if it was right to leave mom, dad, and Greta under such harrowing circumstances. I wondered if my brother and I could help the family somehow if we stayed. But I was fearful that everyone on the transport was about to experience a barbaric death at the Belzec gas chambers. I felt an uncontrollable urge to jump out of the train. It was a very painful decision to jump, which still haunts me to this day.

Once our train reached the forest in Niepolomice, we decided to make our escape. The time had come to say goodbye to my parents and sister. This was the most traumatic moment in my life, knowing that I probably would never see them again.

After my last embrace with my parents and sister, Leszek helped me to climb up the window. It was already dark and the train was moving fast. I took a deep breath and jumped into the night. I fell unconscious on the tracks where I laid for several hours.²

When I awoke early in the morning, it was still dark and I had no conception of where I was. I slowly began to realize what happened to me. I was bruised from the jump but I didn't pay much attention to my condition. My thoughts were with my parents and sister, and whether Leszek survived the jump.

(After the war, I learned that on the same day that the transport arrived in Belzec, seven thousand Jews from the Krakow ghetto perished in the gas chambers. I never again saw or heard from my parents or sister, or from Regina's mother and sisters who were also on that same transport. Apparently, they were among the 600,000 Jews who perished in Belzec.)

Shortly after I regained consciousness, I got my bearings and began to walk along the railroad tracks towards the village of Klaj, hoping

² *Mr. Lewis' escape from the Belzec transport was briefly described in the "Kieler Schwurgericht" newspaper article (Kiel, Germany) in October 1965 following his testimony against Martin Fellenz. See page 39 for article.*

to meet Leszek there. There was no sign of him. Not knowing what to do, I boarded a train to Bochnia, where several of my relatives lived. I thought that maybe he would have gone there for safety. When I arrived in Bochnia, I found our relatives, but there was no sign of Leszek. I became worried about whether he survived the jump from the train.

I spent two nights in Bochnia before deciding to go back to the Krakow ghetto to look for my brothers and girlfriend, Regina. I thanked my family for their hospitality and I left them. While walking to the railroad station, I saw a large group of SS special commandos marching towards the Bochnia ghetto where I had just been. Fortunately, they did not question me or suspect that I was Jewish. If they had questioned me, they would have killed me on the spot. Jews had to wear armbands at all times (I was not wearing mine) and we were not allowed on trains. The punishment for either of these crimes was death.

Had I stayed with my relatives in Bochnia for just a few minutes longer, I would have been trapped in the Bochnia ghetto and threatened with death. The SS commandos that I saw near the train station were preparing to liquidate the Bochnia ghetto that day and transport thousands of Jews to Belzec—the same concentration camp where I was headed to on the transport with my family the day before. I never again saw my relatives from Bochnia. I wondered whether they were transported that day and met their deaths in Belzec.

At this point, I had a horrible sense that most of my immediate family was dead. I felt helpless and alone for the first time in my life. I began to cry from my feelings of desperation. Nevertheless, I had to move on and look ahead in order to survive.

Nowhere to Go (except back to the Krakow ghetto)

It may seem strange that I had headed back to the Krakow ghetto, the very place where Nazis were transporting thousands of people to their deaths. But, the Krakow ghetto was the only place for me to go. I had no other choice. The cities and villages were occupied by Nazis, and I would have been shot for not having a permit to leave the ghetto. I didn't have any connections with underground partisan groups, and I thought that living in the forest was too risky. I went back to the familiar surroundings where I thought I had a chance to survive, even though life in the ghetto was very dangerous.

Two days after my arrival, I was overjoyed when Leszek arrived. He survived the jump and he also determined that the Krakow ghetto offered him the greatest chance to survive. Our younger brother, Jacob, also came to the ghetto to look for the family. He had been placed by our parents in the safety of a gentile family the year before, but when he heard about the mass deportations, he wanted to find out if any of us were still alive.

Because he was only fifteen, ghetto life was much too dangerous for Jacob. Leszek and I were able to place him in "Kabel," a safe factory, with money that our parents gave to us. He was lucky to have worked and lived at Kabel until September 1944.

When I came back to the ghetto, I no longer had a "kennkarte" (identification document), since it was taken from me during my deportation to Belzec. It was very dangerous not to have a Kennkarte. The Nazis ordered us to carry the kennkarte at all times. To ensure my safety, I asked a friend who worked in the labor department to place me with a group of some 150 men, known as the "Barackenbau," who were building the barracks for the new concentration camp at Plaszow. Since Kennkarten were not required for Barackenbau workers, I was lucky to have landed safely again without getting into trouble with the SS – at least for a while.

I had to leave the ghetto and go to the Belzec death camp. I was deported on the last Schwangau transport. My uncle and I escaped to the forest following his execution against Maria Feller. See page 11 for more.

Building Barracks at the Plaszow Concentration Camp

During the first two weeks with the Barackenbaus, I left the Krakow ghetto with a group of fifty men early in the morning and returned back to the ghetto late at night. The walk was quite long, nearly four miles each way. After we had built three barracks, we were placed in one of the barracks and never returned to the Krakow ghetto again.

We built the Plaszow concentration camp under horrible conditions, and constantly under the fear of death. Our daily food ration was just one slice of bread and a cup of dark coffee in the morning, a cup of soup at lunch, and a cup of soup in the evening. This was a meager amount of food for young men after a hard day of physical labor. Many of the men starved to death from hunger. Some were killed when they became weak. If the SS saw anyone not working hard enough, they would shoot the person or whip him with 25 lashes.

The only good thing about working in the Barackenbau was the fact that I avoided being in the ghetto during its final bloody liquidation on March 13, 1943. Several thousand Jewish men, women, and children, including many of my friends and relatives, were massacred on that day. According to all accounts, blood was flowing in the streets of the ghetto like water. Those who survived were transported to Plaszow. Fortunately, Leszek, Regina, and her father, Israel, survived. After five months, it was great to be reunited once again. However, we were about to face the cruel and barbaric realities of life at the Plaszow concentration camp.

Life at Plaszow under Amon Goeth

Plaszow was an extermination camp under the direction of Amon Goeth, the Nazi commander whose treacherous behavior was depicted in the movie, *Schindler's List*. Every day and every night at the camp was a nightmare. Jewish people were mercilessly beaten, shot with guns and rifles, attacked by trained dogs, and hanged from the gallows. We were starved, humiliated, and tortured for no reason whatsoever. Most people were waiting to die and finish the horrors that their lives had become.

In the camp, construction work went on without interruption. We were forced to build barracks, roads, streets, and shops. We worked under tremendous pressure and constant fear.

Commander Goeth was an evil beast—who enjoyed his job. He used to walk or ride his white horse around the camp, always with a gun in his hands. He shot and killed people for target practice. Perhaps he didn't like the way someone looked, or the way another person walked. He would have no mercy on those who needed to take a break from work. They would be shot without notice.

Under Goeth's direction, other Nazis in the camp were encouraged to kill Jews for fun and sport. In addition, mass killing of Jews who disguised themselves as gentiles took place nearly every day on "Hujowa Gurka," a hill overlooking the camp. Most often, these despicable deeds were perpetrated by the Ukrainian camp guards. Dentists were called upon to pull out the gold teeth from the bodies before they were burned. Later on, the tooth extractions were performed before the executions took place.

When the torturing and murderings were finished, gasoline was poured over the presumably dead bodies, which were then burned. I can recall the terrible smell of burning flesh and the smoke from the fires which burned my eyes. It is a terrible memory.

Meanwhile, the Nazis amused themselves by frequently gathering prisoners on the "Appellplatz," where people were beaten, shot, or hanged. During these times, music was played over the loudspeakers.

When a Jewish prisoner was caught stealing food, committing a disturbance, whistling, or singing a song that the Gestapo or SS

didn't like it, we would all be called together at the Appellplatz to watch that prisoner's execution, either by shooting or by hanging at the gallows. Two or three times a week, transports of Jews who were caught with forged (i.e., gentile) papers were brought to the camp to be killed at the Appellplatz.

One scene that I will never forget happened in May 1944, when many small children were suddenly deported by truck from the camp. They were surely headed to their deaths, fulfilling the Nazis mandate to kill all of the children, who represented the future of the Jewish people. Music blasted at high volumes over the speakerphones as the trucks became filled with young victims. Someone later told me that the song played that day was a German folk song titled, "Mommy, Buy Me A Horsie." The cruelty was not to believe.

I can remember the sounds of dozens of parents crying and pleading with the Gestapo for the lives of their children. The parents howled in desperation as the doors to the trucks were locked. The trucks sped through the gates and the children were never seen again. An unusually large number of well-armed guards surrounded the Appellplatz on that day, just in case the Jewish prisoners might seek revenge and revolt. But, we stood helplessly and unarmed in our assigned places, cursing the Nazis, clenching our fists, yet afraid to act because of our pitiful odds. We knew that any act of revenge would be futile and would surely result in a massive loss of Jewish life—for the Nazis treated us as if we were worthless human beings, worthy only of working ourselves to the bone for them and then being killed.

Searching for Safety in a Profession

Before the war broke out, my brother, Leszek, completed his studies to become a mechanic. This enabled him to find a better job as machinist/toolmaker at the camp. Unfortunately, I did not have any skills that could make my life any easier. Before the war, I worked in my father's textile trading business and the skills I learned were not useful to the Nazis at the concentration camp. I knew I had to be productive to stay alive and I was not afraid to try something new. When I learned about an announcement that electricians were needed at the camp, I immediately applied for the job. I did not know anything about electrical work, but my foreman and co-workers were very helpful and showed me what to do.

Working as an electrician was much easier than building barracks. My electrician's armband and belt with electrical tools enabled me to move freely around the camp. I was lucky to have this job for quite a while.

Leserkiewicz Family (before WWII)



Abraham (Victor's father)



Berta (Victor's mother)



Greta (Victor's older sister)



Jacob (Victor's youngest brother)



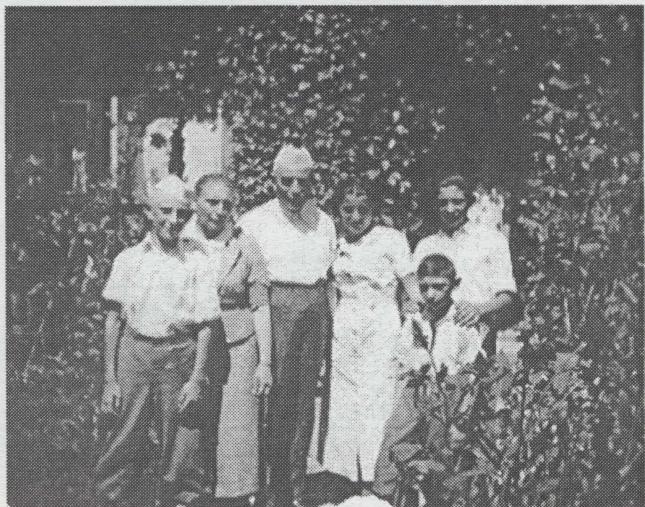
Lola (Victor's oldest sister)



Leszek (Victor's younger brother, postwar)



Victor



Leserkiewicz family, 1936

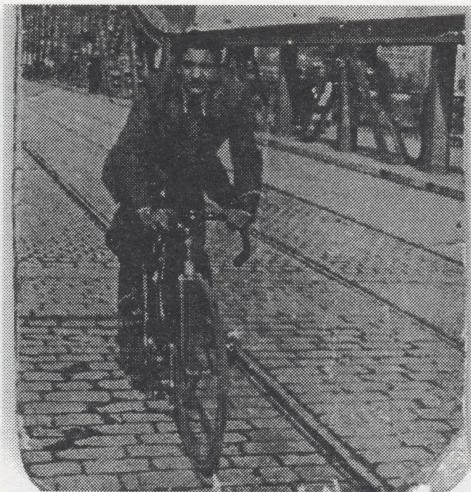
Pre-War Photographs of Family Life



Victor with girlfriend, Regina Steiner, 1939



Parents and sister Lola



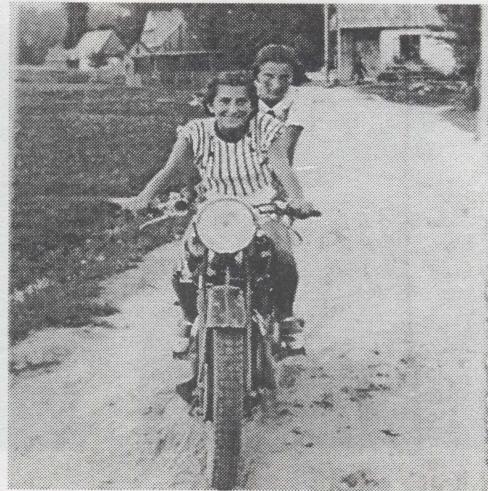
Victor biking over the Vistula River, 1938



Sister Greta with Victor, 1939



Victor with his sisters, 1938



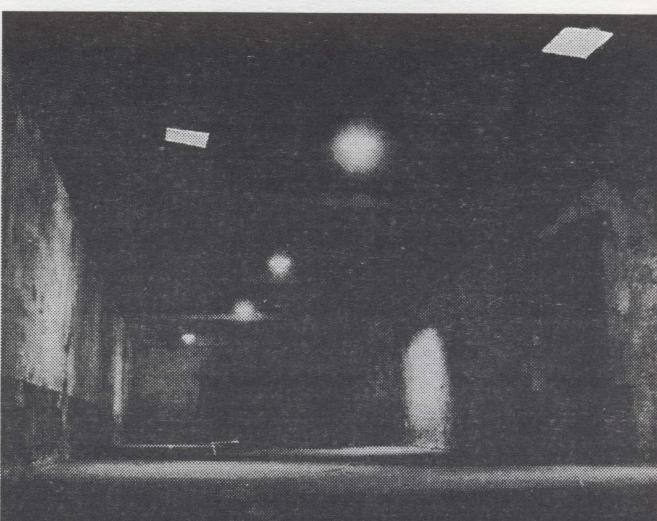
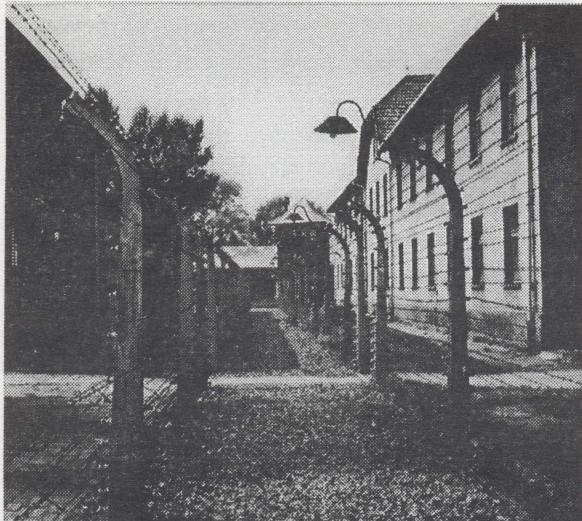
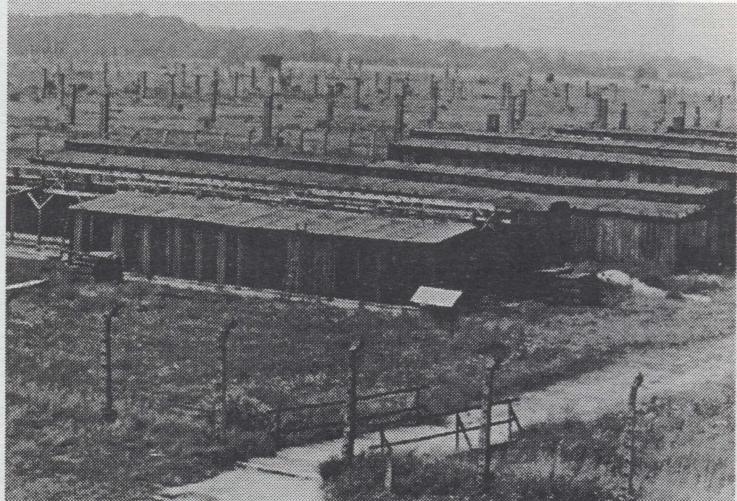
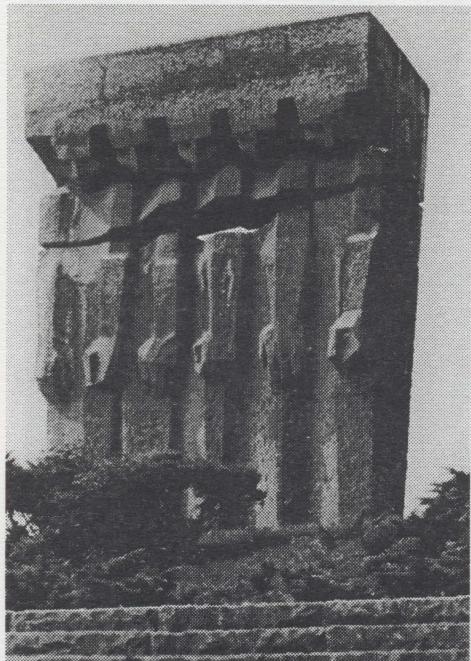
Victor's sisters, 1938

From Our Home to the Ghetto



Before the war, Mr. Lewis' family of seven lived in a three bedroom apartment on Retjana #5 in Podgorze, Krakow (above). The Nazis cordoned off a large section of Podgorze to make a ghetto and forced all of the Jews to move there in 1941. The entrance to the ghetto was just a few blocks away from Mr. Lewis' house (see p.8). Nevertheless, his family was ordered to move into a tiny one bedroom apartment at Targowa #1, which they shared with several other families. For over a year, they were cramped together in one of the rooms on the second floor (photo at left). On October 28, 1942, the Nazis forced the family to vacate the apartment and board the train to the extermination camp at Belzec. Mr. Lewis and his brother, Leszek, managed to jump out of the train and save their lives. They never saw their parents or sister again. (Photos taken in 1986 during Victor Lewis' tour of Poland with his son, Alvin, and daughter-in-law, Meryl)

From the Ghetto to the Concentration Camps at Plaszow and Auschwitz/Birkenau



Mr. Lewis was a member of the “barackenbau” team that built barracks at the Plaszow concentration camp, just a few miles away from Krakow. He managed to survive Plaszow and was transported to Schindler’s factory in Brinnlitz in 1944. Portrayed in all of its horror in “Schindler’s List,” Plaszow was destroyed by the Poles after the war. A monument (above left) was built on the site to commemorate the dead. Mr. Lewis’ wife, Regina, was transported from Plaszow to Auschwitz/Birkenau (above right), and was very lucky to survive the gas chambers (lower right). Electrically-charged barbed wire fences surrounded Auschwitz, (lower left), making it impossible for the captive prisoners to escape.

Rebuilding Family Life: DP Camps, USA



Victor as Chief of Police at DP Camp
in Bad Ischl, Austria



Victor with his wife, Regina



Victor as Co-Captain of DP
Camp soccer team



Brother Leszek (taking pictures)
at Bad Ischl DP Camp



Victor with daughter, Ida, born
at the Bad Ischl DP Camp



Daughter Ida with son, Alvin,
born in the USA

A Special Day: A Tribute to "Schindler's List" Survivors and the Honor to Meet Steven Spielberg



10th Annual International
Elie Wiesel
HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE
Award Dinner

In Honor Of
STEVEN SPIELBERG

Past Award Recipients

Elie Wiesel/1985
Sigmund Strochitz/1986
Benjamin Meed/1987
Samuel Pisar/1988
Sam Halpern/1989
• Harry Wilf/1990
Henry Kissinger/1991
Joshua O. Haberman/1992
Rabbi Israel Meir Lau/1993

November 8, 1994

Mr. Victor Lewis
147-17 78th Road
Flushing, NY 11367

Dear Mr. Lewis:

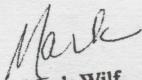
You are cordially invited to join the dais guests at the forthcoming Elie Wiesel Remembrance Award Dinner on Sunday, November 20, 1994 at the Waldorf-Astoria honoring Steven Spielberg and in tribute to the men and women of "Schindler's List."

The VIP reception will take place at 6:00 p.m. in the East Foyer on the third floor, and it is suggested that you use the Lexington Avenue elevator. You will be registering at the special registration desk.

At 7:00 p.m., the dais guests will be escorted to their places for the dais line up.

I look forward to greeting you at that time.

Cordially,


Mark Wilf
Chairman

P.S. Black tie for dais guests



It was an honor to be invited to the Holocaust Remembrance Award Dinner in 1994 as a survivor of "Schindler's List." While there were many other books and movies about the Holocaust, the movie "Schindler's List" really brought the story out of the closet for all to see. I was thrilled to meet Steven Spielberg at the Award Dinner, and I personally thanked him for the great deed he did by deciding to direct the movie.

The Breakup of my Family at Plaszow

On August 6, 1944, my girlfriend, Regina, was sent to Auschwitz. Leszek was sent to Miak-Zschawitz-Dresden. And in September 1944, Jacob's job at the "Kabel" Wermacht Munition Industries had ended. He arrived in Plaszow with a group of about 50 people. His group was told to prepare for a transport to another camp on the very next day. Once again, I had to try to save him. I hid Jacob under a bunk bed in my barracks with hopes that he would remain with me. However, the next day, when some of the prisoners from Kabel didn't show up for the roll call, the Nazis began to search for them with hunting dogs. Jacob left his hiding place and was caught. Fortunately, he wasn't shot, but he was forced to join a transport to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. Regina's father was also put on that transport. I never saw either of them again.

After the war, I learned that Jacob was transferred from Mauthausen to St. Valentin, and then to Ebensee – so he experienced the worst concentration camps in Austria. He miraculously managed to survive, but he died from food poisoning just a few days after the war. I was devastated when I heard the news of his death. He went through so much, for so long, and survived, only to die after the horrors were over. This was very hard for me to take.

A Beating that I'll Never Forget

One day, a telephone call came to our electrician's shop from the SS office with orders to change several light bulbs immediately. My foreman sent me to change the bulbs. I came face-to-face with SS Unterscharfurer Franz Simonlahner, the butcher, beast, killer, and boss of an infamous stone mining operation. My hand began to shake because I knew that he was a sadist. Simonlahner had under his command a group of twenty to thirty men and women whose job was to dynamite rock at the mine and transport the broken stones in push carts to build the roads at the concentration camp.

When I finished changing the light bulbs, Simonlahner handed me two or three cigarettes. I was afraid to take them. Upon his insistence, I eventually took the cigarettes and politely thanked him. When I came back to the shop, I told my fellow workers what happened. No one believed me.

Several days later, another call came to our shop from the SS office, asking that the same electrician who replaced the bulbs should come back to the office again. My foreman decided to accompany me in case something had happened to the lights. When we knocked on the door, we heard Simonlahner say: "Ja, ja, ja, come in!" My heart began to beat like a hammer, but Simonlahner only wanted new lights installed on the other side of the office. We went to work at once. When we were nearly finished, Simonlahner asked the foreman to go back to the shop without me. When I was ready to leave, Simonlahner handed me another pack of cigarettes. I said, "Thank you, but no." He insisted that I "take it, take it, because I do not smoke." When I refused to take the cigarettes, he grabbed my hand and pushed the cigarettes into it. I thanked him again and began to walk out of the office, still wondering why he was being so good to me. Then he said: "Listen, I have more cigarettes and I want you to sell them. I want money to buy nice things." He gave me five packs of cigarettes to sell and told me to bring the money back to him. Selling cigarettes at camp was a crime punishable by death, but paradoxically, I had to do it, for my life was in danger if I didn't sell them.

As it turned out, our arrangement worked well for quite a while. I came to Simonlahner's office often to get bread, butter, candies,

cigarettes, and anything else that was sellable. I had become a black marketeer.

On September 15, 1944, Commander Goeth abruptly ordered to kill several Jewish policemen who knew that he had been stealing valuables from prisoners and kept them for himself, rather than to hand them over to the Nazi authorities. Chief of Jewish Police Wilek Chilewicz, along with his wife, Manek Ferber, two men by the names of Finkelstein and Schnitzer, and several others were murdered on the spot. Their corpses were displayed on the ground for everyone to see. Every prisoner had to walk next to the corpses, and turn their heads in the direction of the corpses. We looked at the bodies because we had to in order to survive. Goeth was soon arrested for corruption and jailed. I think the Gestapo were angered when he killed the Jewish police, either because they were leading an investigation on his smuggling activities, or perhaps the Gestapo, too, were conducting illegal business with the Jewish police.

Meanwhile, my days as a black marketeer were good. I was able to get a little extra food to eat. However, those days were about to end – in violence.

The last time I came to the SS Office, Simonlahner gave me ten packs of cigarettes. Like always, I paid him and put the cigarettes under my shirt. As I walked out of his office, he grabbed me by my hand and tried to pull me into another office. I put up a fight and struggled to get free, but I was afraid of him and his gun. When I stopped struggling with him, Simonlahner took me to the office of SS Oberscharfurer Hujar, another barbaric murderer at the camp.

Simonlahner said to Hujar, "I bring you a black marketeer who has cigarettes under his shirt." Hujar ordered me to pull out the shirt. Ten packs of cigarettes fell out of the shirt and onto the floor. When Hujar asked me where I got the cigarettes, I told him that I bought them from Simonlahner. The two officers began to scream at each other and moved to another room. Then, they came back with whips in their hands and began to beat me all over my head and body until I could not take it anymore. When I fell to the floor, my nose was broken and blood was pouring from my mouth. I heard one of them say, "He is finished" (dead).

The SS officers called the Jewish police (O.D.) and ordered them to dump my body on Hujowa Gurka, to be burned there. Two Jewish policemen took me out of Hujar's office and tossed me into a wheelbarrow. On the way to the hill, I told them I was alive and

asked them to let me out. One of the policemen ordered me to keep quiet and said he would let me go once we got over the hill. He did. Bleeding profusely, I managed to run to the tailor shop where my friend, Ted Wilk, worked. Ted and two other tailors washed me up and bandaged my head so that only my eyes were visible. That was how badly I was beaten. My nose never properly healed.

The next day, Regina's cousin, Judith Steiner, was shocked to see me all bandaged up. I told her what had happened and said that I was lucky to be alive. From that day on, I managed to avoid both Simonlahner and Hujar, who assumed I was dead. I was lucky to succeed in avoiding them during my remaining days at the Plazow concentration camp.

Finishing out the War at Oscar Schindler's Factory

By sheer luck, I was sent to Oskar Schindler's ammunition factory in Brinnlitz, Czechoslovakia, on October 15, 1944. The camp needed electricians, and I had gained some experience in the trade. My prisoner number was Heftling 68940, which was the number that was placed on what 40 years later would be called "Schindler's List."

After 5 years in an environment of intense violence and countless deaths, I was feeling fairly worn down by the Fall of 1944. Had I not been placed on "Schindler's List," I might not have been able to stay alive for much longer. The war was to go on for another 8 months, and the Nazis stepped up the pace of their inhumanity against the Jews. Increasing the rate of Nazi atrocities would be hard for anyone but a Holocaust survivor to imagine.

Once again, I was aboard a cattle train – but this time it was really going to a labor camp. The train stopped at the Gros-Rosen concentration camp where I remained for several days. Then, I got back on the train and headed to Schindler's factory in Brinnlitz, Czechoslovakia.

At the factory, I met a large group of prison workers who were treated much better than anywhere I had been since the outbreak of the war. There were no mass shootings. There was substantially more food than what I was given at Plaszow. And the prisoners were



Currency from the Gross Rosen concentration camp.

not tortured or concerned about their deaths. Some prisoners were fortunate to have been assigned to work at Schindler's factories since the Krakow ghetto days in 1942, a full two years before I was able to be under his custody.

When I arrived at Schindler's factory, I kept thinking about how wonderful it would have been if my family would have had the luck to be with me. Of course, that was not to be. Despite terrible feelings of sorrow for the death of my parents and sister, the uncertainty of the whereabouts of my brothers, and the welfare of my girlfriend at the death camp at Auschwitz. I was thrilled to have finally been in a place that was relatively safe and sane.

I did, however, have to overcome a potentially life-threatening obstacle about two weeks after my arrival at Schindler's factory...

I was assigned to work at the electrical shop, which was supervised by a Nazi civilian. One day, the supervisor ordered me to hook-up a high voltage welding machine. The three electric wires I needed to connect were 15-20 feet above the floor, so I needed to use a ladder. I stepped on the ladder and hooked the first wire, then the second, and when I was about to connect the third wire, I accidentally touched it with the clamp of the first wire, creating a massive electric short that shut down the power to the entire factory. The factory was suddenly dark and quiet. I jumped off the ladder, a bit shaken, but not hurt. Within a short time, someone in the shop threw the circuit breaker and restored the power. The Nazi shop supervisor then arrived and asked me what had happened. When I told to him, he very angrily kicked me in the buttocks and ordered me to go to the shop where he said that he would meet me.

Fearful of what the Nazi supervisor would do to me, I decided to run to Oskar Schindler's house instead. I knocked on the door and Mrs. Schindler came to greet me. I told her what had happened and she asked me to wait outside for a moment. She called Oskar, who came to the door and said that he heard from his wife about the accident. I told him exactly what happened and I pleaded for his help. He instructed me to go back to the shop and wait for him there. When he arrived, he told the Nazi supervisor that he needed an electrician to work on his new apartment, which was being built just outside of the camp. When the supervisor recommended someone, Schindler looked around the room and pointed at me.

"How about him?" Schindler asked. "He is not experienced," replied the supervisor. But Schindler insisted that he wanted me. He told the supervisor that I would be replaced if I did not work out for him. From that day until the camp was liberated in May 1945, I worked on the house that was being built for the Schindlers and at the flour mill, doing an assortment of odd-jobs, including painting, cleaning, and electrical work. In my new job, I never again had contact with the Nazi shop supervisor. I managed to avoid whatever punishment he had in store for me.

The flour mill and Schindler's new house were located outside of the camp. To get to work each morning, I was escorted by the SS so that I would not run away. The working conditions were pretty good and the atmosphere was relaxed. I wouldn't have wanted to escape even if I had the opportunity.

I didn't have a chance to thank Schindler for helping me. I wasn't able to speak with him until after the end of the war.

The Partisan Underground and Oskar Schindler's Escape from Brinnlitz

After a few weeks in Brinnlitz, I met a small group of Jews, including five Russian Jewish POW soldiers who had been in concentration camps in Budzyn and Majdanek. I was invited to join them in an anti-Nazi partisan group that was to consist of twenty-five men. In order to safeguard most of the members of the group, each member was assigned to a unit of only five or six men. The members of each unit did not know the identities of the partisans in any of the other units. This way, if someone were to get arrested, the lives of the partisans in the other units would not be in jeopardy.

The men in my unit were Dubnikov, Jonas, Lipschitz, Miedziuch, and Pozniak.

The partisans established contact with the Czechoslovak underground who were stationed in the nearby forest. They told us that the Russians were advancing on the battlefield and that the Germans would soon be defeated. There were rumors that the Nazis might step up their murderous activities at the extermination camps and prison camps, and possibly obliterate any evidence of what took place in them. The Czech underground supplied us with guns and rifles and warned us about a possible attack by the Gestapo and Waffen SS. In the event of an attack, they told us to defend ourselves and assured us that they would come to our rescue.

Oskar Schindler knew about the partisan underground group operating in his factory, but he didn't do anything to destroy it. Since he treated us well and tried to protect us, he probably didn't feel threatened by the partisans. Also, he might have known that the Germans were about to be defeated and he needed to develop ties with the Jews to save his own life from the advancing Russian army (at several camps that had been liberated, the Russian army and angry groups of liberated prisoners tracked down Nazi camp officers and took immediate justice into their hands, hanging the officers for all to see).

I recall Schindler's farewell speech to us. "Do not thank me for your survival," he said. "Thank your fellow people, who worked day and night to save yourselves from extermination. You faced death every moment while you were at the Plaszow concentration camp." He asked us to keep a silent vigil for three minutes in memory of the countless victims who died during the past six years. Then, he provided the leader of the partisans with nine rifles and ten hand guns, but warned him not to use the weapons unless there was an emergency. He also told the partisan leader not to give the weapons to any inexperienced men or women, because any gunshots heard outside of the camp could provoke the German army to enter the camp and slay all of the survivors.

As it turned out, the Germans soon surrendered and the war in Europe came to an end. The underground partisans did not need to fight the SS or the Gestapo.

To save Oskar Schindler's life before the Russians entered the camp, several of the Jewish inmates were preparing to help him escape. At about midnight, eight people in concentration camp uniforms, including a driver by the name of Rysiek Rehen, took off with the Schindlers in a car and a truck loaded with food, cigarettes, and alcohol. The convoy rode through the gates of the camp, left Czechoslovakia, and headed to the American-occupied zones in Austria and Germany, and to the French-occupied zone in Germany. Schindler wanted to cross the border to enter Switzerland, but the border patrol did not permit him to do so.

Schindler's motive to save Jews remains a mystery. In my opinion, his main concern was to avoid army combat. By operating successful ammunition factories, Schindler was able to find a non-military solution to make himself useful to the Nazi war machine. I also think that Schindler's adventurous disposition compelled him to bribe, outwit, and win over those in his path. Perhaps he risked his life to save Jews so that he could build a post-war alibi when the Germans were defeated.

No matter what was Schindler's motives, it cannot be denied that he and his wife saved more than 1,200 Jews from being massacred.

Liberation and the Search for Family

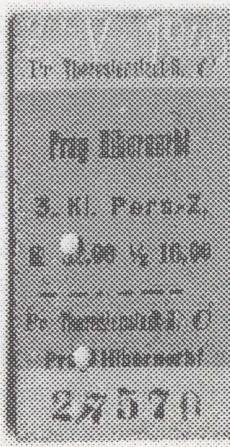
After Schindler's departure, the underground partisan group took command of the camp. The leader of the partisans shut the gates and announced that no one could leave. The armed partisans, myself included, took positions at all of the doors and windows.

The partisans immediately opened the kitchen so that all of the inmates could be fed.

A Russian Jewish partisan named Elia Dubnikov, who survived Majdanek, Budzyn, Plaszow, and Gross Rosen, managed to catch one of the Nazi "capos" and drag him to the factory hall. The capo had arrived at Brinnlitz from Goleszow during the previous winter with a cargo of Jews, most of whom were frozen to death. Now, it was the capo's turn to be punished. Dubnikov mercilessly hung the Nazi capo to death on one of the steel beams in the factory.

On the very next day, three Czech partisans came to the camp and yelled, "You are all liberated! You are free! The Red (Russian) army will be here in a few hours." Later that day, a Russian officer came to the camp and announced, "The war is over. You are free. There are no more concentration camps. You can go home or to wherever else you want to go."

Surviving Jews from concentration camps throughout Europe began to move around from one camp to another, looking for their families. Two or three days after liberation, a friend (Lefkowicz) from Kracow-Podgorze came to Brinnlitz in search of his family. After we embraced, he told me that my brother, Leszek, was very sick with typhoid at the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia and that he needed medical help immediately. I ran to the Russian Military Commandant's office at our camp, and asked him to write a pass to allow me to go to Theresienstadt. Within an hour, I was at the train station with several friends who were in search of their own families. It took us all night to travel to Theresienstadt.



Actual ticket to Theresienstadt purchased by Victor Lewis on May 23, 1945 (purchase date was printed at the top of the ticket). Mr. Lewis found his brother, Leszek, at the camp and his girlfriend, Regina, whom he married on July 2, 1945.

When we arrived at the camp, we were met with a sign at the closed gates that read "NO ENTRY; TYPHOID FEVER." There was an epidemic at the camp. I walked around the fence of the camp and found a hole, which I crawled through.

I immediately came upon an acquaintance from Krakow who asked me, "Victor, what are you doing here?" I told him that I was looking for my brother. He said that he would bring me to him, but he first wanted to take me to see someone else. We walked into the women's barracks, and several of the girls who knew me began to yell: "Rega, Rega, someone is here to see you!" I was shocked. My girlfriend, Regina, was alive. Against all odds, she had survived Auschwitz. We kissed and embraced. We were thrilled to be together again.

Then, I asked the acquaintance to bring me to my brother.

Before the war, Leszek was a very handsome teenager, about 180 pounds and six feet tall. When I saw him at the end of the war in Theresienstadt, he looked like a skeleton. Leszek weighed about 70 pounds and could hardly talk. We both cried and I told him that I was going to take him to Schindler's camp at Brinnlitz, which had doctors and medicine. I assured him that he would be OK.



Regina Steiner's (Lewis) currency from the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

I went back to Regina and told her that I had to take my brother to Brinnlitz the next morning. I told her that the Russians were going to bring the survivors from Brinnlitz back to Krakow, and I asked her to try to get to Krakow as soon as possible. I said that I would be waiting there for her arrival.

The next morning, I took my brother to Brinnlitz with my Russian friend, Elia Dubnikov. It took us twelve hours to get there by train. Dr. Biberstein and Dr. Hilfstein, both from Krakow, examined Leszek and gave him some medication. However, they told me that he needed to be hospitalized. So, we boarded a Russian army train to Krakow, where I took Leszek to the Lazarz Hospital. The hospital did not have sufficient facilities to help him. One of the physicians told me that if I wanted to save my brother's life, I had to take him to the American zone for special medicines that were not available in Poland. But I needed to wait for Regina to come to Krakow. She was recuperating in Theresienstadt from her own horrible experiences, including the death of her parents and sisters, and she was pondering what to do with her life.

While in Krakow, I learned about atrocities that were taking place against the Jews across Poland, despite the fact that the war was over, and despite all that we had been through. The Poles were conducting pogroms - in Krakow, Kielce, Nowy Targ, Rabka, and other towns and cities. They did not want the Jews to come back home and reclaim their belongings! Houses, apartments, property, businesses, and stores seized by the Nazis were taken over by the Poles, who had no intention of returning the stolen assets to us. The Poles began to shoot the Jews who were coming back home. Anti-Semitism in Poland was on the rise (it never disappeared). It became apparently clear to me that there must be better places to live than in

Poland. Palestine and America seemed like good alternatives to me. But I couldn't spend too much time thinking about emigrating at this time.

Regina arrived in Krakow four weeks later, on July 1, 1945. On the very next day, we were married at the home of Rabbi Levertow. The ceremony, attended by ten close friends and several cousins, was meaningful but not very romantic. It lasted about 20 minutes.

The following day, our group of survivors, mostly from Schindler's camp at Brinnlitz, left Krakow for the American Zone in Austria.

Renewing Our Lives in Austria

Our mission to Austria was to get Leszek some medical attention, find a good displaced person's camp to live, and try to find my youngest brother Jacob. Someone had told me that he survived the Holocaust and that he was last seen at the Ebensee concentration camp in Austria.

Leszek was very sick at this point, but the people in our group helped me to take care of him. I was fortunate to be with a truly caring group of people, most of whom I remained very close with when we moved to America.

We obtained border passes from Polish authorities to go to Czechoslovakia, but when we arrived at the town of Budzejowice, the Russian army would not let us pass through the Austrian border. The next morning, I walked through the forest with my friend, Joe, to find a place to cross the border. There was no place to cross.

About an hour later, we saw four American trucks loaded with Jewish survivors from the Mauthausen concentration camp. The survivors were dropped off at the Railroad Station so that they could go back to Poland and search for their families. My wife, Regina, recognized her uncle, Shulem, among the Mauthausen survivors. We were most happy to see him, alive and well, and in search of his wife and son. Unfortunately, as he learned later, they did not survive. We told him that his sister-in-law, Helen, who was also Regina's aunt, was liberated at the Theresienstadt concentration camp. He was glad to hear the good news. We later learned that Shulem and Helen got married in Krakow and moved to Israel.

I approached an American army officer and, through an interpreter, I asked him to help us enter Austria. When he saw Leszek's bad condition, he called a Polish-speaking American soldier and asked him to help us. The soldier put two people from our group into each of his trucks, and covered us with blankets so that the Russians would not see us. When we arrived at the other side of the Austrian border, he wanted to let us off. Joe and I begged him to take us all the way to Ebensee, which he was reluctant to do. But when he noticed Leszek's poor health, he offered to take all of us on one truck to Gmunden. He said that we had to be on our own from there.

In Gmunden, we were fortunate to meet an acquaintance from Krakow, who offered to bring us all the way to the Displaced Persons Camp in Ebensee. There, we all received food and shelter. When I brought Leszek to the hospital, I was met by two doctors, Dr. Ludwig Gross and Dr. Martin Wald, who I knew from Krakow. They promised that they would take care of Leszek and bring him back to health if I brought him milk, butter, eggs, and other nutritious foods that were in short supply at the hospital. I brought food to Leszek every day. After four months of proper care and good nourishment, Leszek was finally able to leave the hospital as a strong and healthy young man. He emigrated to America and raised a family with two beautiful children.

But the outcome of my little brother, Jacob, was not as lucky as Leszek's. I was unable to find him in Ebensee and no one would provide me with any information about his whereabouts. But when my friends saw that Leszek was recovering and that he would survive, they told me about Jacob's fate. He did survive the horrors of the Holocaust and he was liberated at the end of the war in Ebensee, as I had heard. But tragically, he died at the camp just a few days after liberation. Perhaps he died from malnutrition. Or, perhaps he ate some spoiled food. No one knew for sure. But for me, my search for Jacob was over. I would never see my youngest brother again.



(left to right): Victor, Regina, and Leszek at a DP camp in Austria after the war.

Epilogue

In October 1965, I was asked to come to the German Consulate in New York to identify SS Obersturmführer Martin Fellenz, the sadist Nazi commander of the Krakow ghetto deportation who ripped-up my working papers and ordered thousands of Jews, including my parents, brother, sister, and me, to board the transport to the gas chambers of Belzec, under extremely violent and inhumane conditions.

OCTOBER 1965

Ein Jude sprang aus dem Zug

Weitere Zeugenaussagen im Mordprozeß gegen Fellenz

Kiel (Eigener Bericht): Durch eine verwegene Flucht aus dem fahrenden Eisenbahnzug entging 1942 der jetzt in New York lebende 47jährige Schlosser Viktor Louis dem sicheren Tode im Juden-Vernichtungslager Belsec. Bekannt wurde dies gestern am 18. Verhandlungstag im Mordprozeß gegen den ehemaligen SS-Obersturmführer Martin Fellenz vor dem Kieler Schwurgericht.

Als Jude mußte der Zeuge 1942 als Kraftfahrzeugmechaniker im Sanitätszweiglager Krakau der Waffen-SS arbeiten. Seine Leistungen wurden gut beurteilt; er wurde sogar voll verpflegt.

Dann begann die große Aussiedlung. Wie alle Juden stellte sich auch der Zeuge zweimal der im Getto-Arbeitsamt vorgenommenen Vor-Auswahl, die darüber entschied, wer bleiben durfte und wer in den Tod geschickt werden sollte. Um dem drohenden Verhängnis zu entgehen, zeigte der Angeklagte eine „Unabkömmlichkeits-Bescheinigung“ vor, die ihn die SS-Dienststelle ausgestellt hatte. Umsonst! Es war der Angeklagte Fellenz, bekundete der Zeuge, der ihm die Bescheinigung aus der Hand nahm und ungesehen zerriß. Das

geschah mit den Worten „Nehmt ihn weg!“ Es bedeutete den sicheren Tod.

Ohne den Versuch einer Gegenwehr wollte der Zeuge dieses Schicksal nicht auf sich nehmen. Vorsorglich hielt er deshalb das Blatt einer Eisensäge im Stiefel versteckt. Während der Fahrt sägte er dann die dicken Eisenkrampen durch, die die Schiebetür von außen verschlossen. „Gegen 21 Uhr war es geschafft. Ich sprang aus dem Zuge und blieb bis zum Morgengrauen auf dem Bahndamm liegen. Dann schlich ich mich zu Fuß ins Krakauer Getto zurück.“

Ans Unwahrscheinliche grenzte, was weiterhin geschah: Noch während der „Abstellung“ hatte sich sein unmittelbarer Vorgesetzter, ein Schirrmeister

der Waffen-SS, vergeblich um die Freistellung des Zeugen bemüht! Nach der Flucht wurde der Zeuge von Angehörigen seiner bisherigen SS-Dienststelle in einer Groß-Schneiderei entdeckt und zur Fortführung seiner Arbeit in das Krakauer Sanitätsdepot der Waffen-SS zurückgeholt! „Alle wußten, daß ich auf dem Transport geflüchtet war.“

„Wenn man Angst gehabt hat von einem Mann, dann hat man ihn auch nach 23 Jahren noch gut in Erinnerung“, gab der Zeuge auf die Frage des Vorsitzenden zur Antwort, ob er den Angeklagten als den Mann wiedererkenne, der ihm im Getto-Arbeitsdienst die „Uk-Stellung“ der Waffen-SS abgenommen habe.

„Es ist ausgeschlossen, daß ich ihn den Ausweis abgenommen und zerrissen habe. Das habe ich nie gemacht“, wies Fellenz die belastende Darstellung des Zeugen entschieden zurück. /

Ein bezeichnendes Schlaglicht auf die Verhältnisse warf die Aussage des gleichfalls in New York lebenden 49jährigen Kaufmannes Richard Abrahamer der 1942 als Angestellter der Jüdischen Gemeinde in Krakau tätig war. Konkret erinnerte sich der Zeuge an einer von Fellenz unterzeichneten Befehl des SS- und Polizeiführers Krakau, in dem der Krakauer Judenrat aufgefordert wurde, die gesamten Transportkosten für die Aussiedlung zu erstatten!

Article published in German newspaper (Kiel, Germany, 1965) about Mr. Lewis' testimony at the Fellenz trial.

At the consulate in New York, I was asked to identify Fellenz's picture in a photo album of about 50 SS officers. I was able to point to Martin Fellenz's photograph right away. When I was asked if I was interested to be a witness for the prosecution at Fellenz's trial, to be held Kiel, Germany, I said that I would go gladly. I was eager to seek revenge for the horrors he committed.

During the court proceedings in Kiel, I came face to face with Fellenz after some 20 years. It was a tense moment for me to be in anti-Semitic Germany--the country that tried to exterminate my people--testifying against a former Nazi German officer. The judges asked me if I could recognize the accused. I remembered his vicious face immediately. Pointing to Fellenz, I said, "Yes, this is the man who killed thousands of Jews, including my parents and my sister." Fellenz denied that he ever knew me, which was true. I was just one of tens of thousands of Jewish civilians that he was responsible for imprisoning, torturing, abusing, and killing in the Krakow ghetto.

After the trial, I returned to the United States. I never found out whether Fellenz was convicted or set free, and I didn't really want to know--for I thought it was entirely possible, even probable, that despite all the evidence against him, the German government just might set him free.

In Appreciation

I am most thankful to the persistence of Leopold Page (Poldek Pfeferberg), who had the opportunity to meet writer Thomas Keneally and the courage to interest Keneally to write "Schindler's List." I am also thankful to Steven Spielberg, for putting "Schindler's List" on the screen, for taking the Holocaust "out of the closet" and for illustrating so eloquently the horrible story of Jewish abuse during the Holocaust, just the way it happened. The story of "Schindler's List" is essentially my story and the story of many of my friends, some of whom were depicted in the book and movie. I only wish that I could have been at Schindler's factory much earlier in the war, and I wish that my family could have been there with me.

I am thankful to Elinor Brecher for her 1994 book, "Schindler's Legacy." Elinor interviewed my wife, Regina, and me for a chapter in her book. I was happy to recount my experiences for others to read.

Shortly after "Schindler's Legacy" was published, I got a telephone call from Dr. Alexander Alerhand, who lives in Israel and had read the book. Dr. Alerhand asked me, "Are you the man who cut off the bars from the cattle car during the second transport from the Krakow ghetto and who jumped out of the train to Belzec with his brother?" When I said "Yes, that's me," he replied, "Well, I'd like to thank you for saving my life." Unbeknown to me until that telephone call, Dr. Alerhand was on that same transport as I was on October 28, 1942, and he told me that he jumped out after me and Leszek. I had always wondered whether anyone else had managed to survive the transport. Fifty two years later, I learned that my actions saved the life of another person on that transport! To my knowledge, Leszek and Dr. Alerhand were the only other people who survived. On our very next trip to Israel, my wife and I met Dr. Alerhand and his family in Haifa. It was a great moment, and we have been in contact ever since.

I am thankful to Steven Morrow (z"l) and to all of the founders of the New Cracow Friendship Society for devising what has been a truly beautiful way for Holocaust survivors from Krakow to get together in numbers as good friends and "family." For the past 35 years, the Society has done wonders in bringing Krakowians together for lasting friendship and goodwill.

causes. It has been a marvelous organization that has helped many of us to cope with the past.

I am thankful to my dearest wife, Regina, who fell in love with me before the war, remained in love with me during the war, and married me after the war. She has been my love and inspiration for over 65 years. She has even remained patiently by my side during the last several years – when I bought a computer at age 79, learned to type, and began to write my story. She allowed me to jump out of bed in the middle of the night to record painfully distant memories that came back into



My wife Regina's dearest family, the Steiners, all of whom perished in the Holocaust. (clockwise from upper left): Regina's mother Ida and sisters, Eugenia and Teofilia, were on the same transport to Belzec that I escaped from with my brother Leszek. They were never seen again. Regina's father, Israel, was transported to Mauthausen and then to the extermination camp at Guzen. He was never heard from again.

my consciousness as I got involved writing this story. I thank Regina for being so understanding of my desire to work on this project.

I am thankful for God's first gift to Regina and me, our daughter Ida, who in 1947 was one of the first children to be born at the Displaced Person's camp in Bad Ischl, Austria. Bringing Ida into the world was our biggest pleasure and demonstrated that we were finally on our way to new beginnings. Decades ago, Ida gave me the idea to write this account of my wartime experiences.

I would like to thank my longtime friend, Dr. Erna Helfstein, for jogging my memory and for her helpful comments to the manuscript.

And finally, I would like to thank my son, Alvin, who encouraged me to buy a computer when I retired, who helped to teach me how to use it, and who worked so diligently with me for two years on editing and producing this autobiography.



Family photograph at Victor and Regina's 50th Anniversary Party, June 1995. (L-R): Daughter-in-law Meryl, son Alvin, wife Regina, Victor, daughter Ida, and (bottom) grand-daughter Jennifer.

